

- 5 Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Male Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 6 Indeed, the status of comics in Europe and especially France – *Bandes Dessinées* – is much higher than in the Anglo-American world: comics are the 'ninth art'; the Centre d'Études des Littératures d'Expression was founded in 1962 in Paris.
- 7 In *Stripsearch* (London: Camden Arts, 1990), pp. 5–7, a brochure for a graphic novel exhibition in Camden. Paul Dawson teaches a course on 'The Graphic Novel' at Manchester University.

Apology

The following review article originally appeared in *Textual Practice*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1994. Unfortunately the text as printed did not contain important revisions which were made after submission of the original article. The publishers and editors would like to apologize to Terri Ginsberg for this oversight and take the opportunity to reprint the revised text in full.

Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 267 pp., \$16.95 (paperback)

Over the past several years, to pick up a scholarly book on film has meant being faced with writing informed by one of three modes of inquiry: neo-formalism, experiential culturalism, and new historicism. An inspection of the conditions of emergence of these modes of cultural theory finds them continuous with the enabling conditions of phenomena obtaining in other spheres of social (re)production, namely those of economic resources and state power, a disclosure coming as no surprise to theorists situated on the left, but one subject to vicious contestation by film theorists whose stakes are more aligned with programmes of the dominant sector, whether positioned in contemporary terms as 'liberal' or 'conservative'. This is because theorists of the left – also known as critical theorists or intellectuals – are concerned with how modes of knowing (including reading books and newspapers, or watching films, plays and TV), as part of the domain of cultural production, are linked in support of, negotiation with or resistance to the oppressive and exploitative functioning of global, transnational capitalism, a concern the effect of which *Seeing Films Politically*, by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, forcefully and rigorously displays is none other than the realized possibility of dismantling and resituating – critiquing, or theorizing – the very foundations – the unspoken tenets, or ideology – of mainstream film theory.

Seeing Films Politically begins with an elaborate reading of these

three modes, but because its theoretical approach is critique, the reader is spared the expected New Critical series of examples whereby the theorist cites the adequacies and inadequacies of each mode with respect to some *a priori* standard so taken for granted its principles need not be uttered, much less defended. Instead, *Seeing Films Politically* takes the citing of theoretical examples as the occasion for providing an explanation of not simply the 'details' of these discourses – their 'inner workings' or 'logics' – but of the complex ways in which they come to serve the perpetuation of capitalist social relations. In doing this, *Seeing Films Politically* refuses to take these examples – or those of the films it later reviews – as either fixed objects or intertextual matrices to be 'fetishized' and 'respected' as sacred entities against which harsh criticism ought not be levied due to their presumed existence as projections of the 'creative will'. *Seeing Films Politically* sees little time for such light-footed romanticism in the face of the grave urgencies presented by today's increasingly ominous global situation. Aware of the 'unpopularity' of its position amongst the die-hard figureheads of the dominant cinema studies regime of truth, *Seeing Films Politically* knows that the paradigm speaking these examples – along with its historico-political determinants – are nothing less than its enabling conditions, and it is firmly, unabashedly set on their overthrow.

Seeing Films Politically effects this veritable conceptual revolution through what it calls *renarration*, a critical practice enabling the production of *alterior* readings of filmic or written texts, readings that contest commonsensical 'interpretation' with a radical frame of comprehension that 'offcenters a film's tales and indicates their historical contingency' (p. 23). Crucial to this radical framework is *Seeing Films Politically's* notion of the *tale* as not simply the aesthetic intersection of 'story' and 'plot' (as most theory has come to see it since Russian Formalism) but the effect of a *post-textual* endowment of meaning produced through struggles in the global social arena. *Seeing Films Politically* thus maintains the concept of the social totality in a way that film theory of the dominant order has disallowed since the (anti)foundations of poststructuralism provided the perfect alibi with which to relegate any attempt to read the matter of history past the confines of the 'local' or 'molecular' to the status of 'totalitarian' dogmatism. For such theory – the same decrying 'political correctness' – resistance and domination are but 'ludic' notions, delusions of paranoiacs and misguided conspiracy theorists who have not understood the 'fact' that a text, as 'autonomous object', contains in neo-Hegelian fashion its own, internal policing device and as such beckons nothing more than an 'appreciative' reception. *Seeing Films*

Politically discloses this 'fact' as none other than a discursive device transposing the mechanics of capitalist social relations into reified cultural fabric, and proffers in its stead the notion of *theory as resistance*, for which those social mechanics, in all their exploitativeness, are brought to the fore and subjected to the possibility of radical transformation.

Indeed, for *Seeing Films Politically*, one of the most occluded concepts of contemporary film theory is that of *possibility*. *Seeing Films Politically* finds that the dominant modes of contemporary film theory rest upon empiricist foundations, in that they assume an identity between the actual – the world 'out there' supposedly directly accessible to self-evident sensual 'experience' – and the real – the world as it is made knowable through frames of intelligibility enabled by prevailing social conditions and therefore subject to change in a way that the actual, immune to historical overdetermination, is not. When empiricist-based theory conflates these two fields, it privileges the terms of the former and naturalizes their referent as, *tel quel*, the real. As a result, any knowledge-practice attempting to re-situate the 'real' as an effect of intelligibility (our latter case) rather than sheer affect is presumed impossible. It is this kind of intellectual censorship *Seeing Films Politically* is working to counter.

For *Seeing Films Politically*, change is not a matter of flow and flux – of evolution – but of the stakes of capitalist social economy, of inclusion, exclusion and the politics of exploitation. In the post-modern academy, it is commonly thought that 'everything is political' in the pluralist sense for which all cultural phenomena are necessarily inflected with the 'biases' of specific, antagonistic 'points of view'. What such 'ethics' conveniently overlooks, however, are the invisible, i.e., non-obvious, systemic conditions of both the emergence and legitimization of any 'specificity', as well as the non-sovereign status of its 'specific' subjects – also known as 'individuals' – in light of their decentered positionality *vis-à-vis* the social arena. *Seeing Films Politically* replaces such ethics with politics, the struggle for control over the means of production in all social spheres, be they of state power, material resources, or cultural representation. These politics, we are reminded, are none other than those of class struggle, which on the plane of cultural criticism constitute what *Seeing Films Politically*, following Althusser, designates as *theory*. What allows pluralism to elide this designation is its refusal to consider social spheres as linked by anything but 'accident'. Such triviality then makes it very easy to decry systemic thinking – attempts to forge conceptual links in terms of social economy – as 'totalizing'. Change for pluralism

obtains merely on the specific, or 'local' level of reform rather than at the global level of transformation.

Rejecting the limitations of the Foucauldian 'specific intellectual', then, *Seeing Films Politically* suggests that for a critical text to make a political rather than ethico-aesthetic intervention, it must call attention not merely to its conditions of 'existence' but to those of its possibility. In other words, for theory to make a *real* difference, it must construct a frame of reference in the face of which readers are enabled to come to *other*, larger explanations of presumed 'objects' of criticism, to 'show the "other" tale that is not told' (p. 24) and thereby to take such tale, 'as a cultural mode of exchange, back from the "professionals" and make it, once again, part of active ideological struggles for social transformation' (p. 25).

One of the strategies of *Seeing Films Politically's* renarration in this regard is its undermining of bourgeois 'subtlety' through the articulation of *crudeness*. Recalling the marxian reading of the bourgeoisie as a social regime working to insure its survival by mystifying its enabling conditions, *Seeing Films Politically* refuses to stake its claims politely, realizing that 'a kinder, gentler administration' of knowledge is merely a dissimulation of the untold terror and exploitation wreaked by such neoliberal projects as the 'New World Order'. Instead of miming the significance of transnational capital, *Seeing Films Politically* stages a relentless attack against the dominant logic of oppression and exploitation by articulating the terms of its struggle as often as possible. This articulation is effected by a strategy of repetition, which to those theorists uncomfortable with such bold display of the political implications of their writing seems 'exasperating' or 'prosecutorial' but to *Seeing Films Politically* is simply part and parcel to the critique of the bourgeois discourses of scholarly etiquette: 'tone', 'style', and 'readability'. The effect of this strategy is a repositioning of the reader in a manner likened to Brecht's well-known *verfremdungs machen*, the praxis of estranging, or distancing the reader *not* from her affections, as would be the case for a Sartrean 'self-alienation', but from the mode of intelligibility through which she currently makes sense of, or appropriates, the real. As such, the reader is carried 'outside' the confines of the text 'itself' into the arena of post-textual, or non-discursive, social struggle and differentiation, where she is enabled to see not merely what the text 'is' but what it 'isn't', not merely where it sits, but how and why it leads. *Seeing Films Politically's* mode of repetition hence takes the reader to the (material, not mystical) territory of unseen possibility in the face of which repetition is no longer a matter of the 'eternal return' of

existential phenomenology but of the transformative movement of radical critical theory.

It is deducible from this explanation that the 'form' that a text takes is not so much the cognitive 'expression' of an ideal 'essence' but the barometer of its *situatedness*, of the significance of the stakes it claims within the social arena. As *Seeing Films Politically* is a decidedly interventionist text, its 'form' too is indicative of its placement-in-struggle and indeed dramatizes this battle in terms of the radical dismantling it endorses of dominant film theory. Rather than immediately provide the reader with analyses of selected films, thus formulating a relative degree of 'abstraction' from the 'concrete base' of the films' 'objecthood', *Seeing Films Politically* opens onto three chapters dealing strictly with theory and only afterwards stages an engagement with films on that basis. But, following Marx: 'The first part of the book is not a literal "exposition" and "preparation" for the second part but a matrix of signifiers that are enabling conditions of the "meanings" of the signifieds of the second part' (p. 149). *Seeing Films Politically's* acknowledgement and foregrounding of its enabling conditions is not the humble apology for and genuflection to a fixed 'model' of critical normativity but the *politically reflexive* disarticulation of that which prompts a radical critique of these films in the first place. In this way, *Seeing Films Politically* deconstructs the tenets of empiricism and idealism in one fell swoop.

The films selected for critique continue this radical agenda. Not only are they shown to be texts among others (e.g., critical texts) but, in this light, further occasions for the symptomatic reading of contemporary social struggle. Because, for example, the empiricism of much film theory is articulated through discourses of 'desire' and 'pleasure', whereby the notions of 'relationship' and 'love' are idealized, or placed 'beyond' history, *Seeing Films Politically* focuses its reading on film texts the meanings of which it finds overdetermined by those ultimately nostalgic and politically complacent discourses whose critical sitings are ironically *unpleasurable* to those theorists whose professional (among other) stakes are in danger of being yanked by the implications of such attention. By focusing on social discourse rather than sheer form, moreover, *Seeing Films Politically* effectively avoids the pitfalls suturing the writing of perhaps the most outspoken and prolific neo-formalist/historian of the dominant cinema studies regime, David Bordwell, whose pithy term for critical theoretical frameworks – 'SLAB theory' – functions to bracket real possibility and thereby position his writing firmly within the domain of the reactionary and censorial. In contrast, while *Seeing Films Politically* places brackets around the paradigms it contests, it never forgets

that, far from being superfluous, they engage and appropriate highly powerful and productive discourses for the purposes of perpetuating an oppressive, hegemonic system. Rigour will not permit *Seeing Films Politically* to facilely relegate its opponents to the status of nonsense, as it knows such sophisticated will to ignorance, and not its own position, constitutes the field of the 'totalizing', 'politically correct', hermetically sealed intellectual vacuum.

It is always unfortunate that books like *Seeing Films Politically* are necessary, but likewise fortunate that theorists such as Mas'ud Zavarzadeh proceed to take up arms at the intellectual front, even and especially during times like the present in which the very possibility of publishing books such as his has been seriously jeopardized by a conservative wave of anti-intellectualism that denigrates anything 'smacking' of theory to the level of the 'unpractical', 'ineffective', 'naïve', 'illogical', and 'ridiculous'.¹ In the face of such utter discrimination and exclusionism as it masquerades in the regalia of liberal openness, we must know that it is only through books such as *Seeing Films Politically* that, as theorists of culture, we might be given the tools not merely to interpret the world, but to change it.

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Note

- ¹ See Zavarzadeh's "Argument" and the Politics of Laughter', *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (1991), pp. 120–31.